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### Faithful Blogger

### Knoxville bishop among first to use Web log to communicate with church members and clergy

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Religious leaders are embracing one of the newest communication modes to connect with their communities. One local bishop uses his weblog, or blog, to learn the area and connect with local clergy. He is recognized as being the nation's first United Methodist bishop to do so.

Last fall, the Rev. James Swanson became the newest bishop to head Holston Conference, which includes 168,000 members in East Tennessee, southwest Virginia, West Virginia and northern Georgia. Shortly after his arrival, Donna Hankins, multimedia coordinator for Holston, suggested he set up a blog. A blog is a chronological, frequent e-journal of personal thoughts, Web links and current events, **according to NetLingo, a dictionary of Internet terms.**

"I thought it would be a good way (for Swanson) to introduce himself to our churches and our members," said Hankins, who is associate director of communications. "I knew he was interested in technology from our early meetings when he came to visit the area."

Conference communications staff developed the channel for Swanson, who moved to East Tennessee after serving as district superintendent in South Georgia Conference's Savannah District. The 55-year-old minister is a graduate of Southern Bible College and C.H. Mason Seminary at Atlanta's Interdenominational Theological Center. He is in the process of completing a doctorate degree in evangelism from Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University. He and his wife, Delphine Yvonne Ramsey, have six children and seven grandchildren.

"I've just been around Internet technology myself for 10 years, and I knew blogging had been around and growing in popularity the last couple of years," Hankins said. "I try to add new features on the Web site." Plus, who else would people want to hear from on a regular basis?" In a September posting, Swanson challenged those in pastoral ministry to consider how they would answer if "anyone ever asked you if you prayed or asked you if you read the Bible for more than just sermon material?"

Another probing inquiry for his blog: "Do you realize that people come to you primarily for spiritual guidance? These are questions that those of us in the pastoral ministry are seldom, if ever, asked but questions we must answer. It hits at the heart of our personal relationship with Christ and is not a question of performance but of preparation to live as Christians. Think about it. Let me hear your thoughts on this."

Swanson's blog — <http://holstonconference.com/bishopblog> — has already achieved national recognition. He was the first United Methodist bishop with a weblog, according to Reporter Interactive, an electronic publication of the ecumenical weekly the National Christian Reporter.

"This conference has made great strides in use of online communication over the past three years," Hankins told Reporter Interactive. "We were fortunate to have our previous bishop make a commitment to expanding communications in this way. We were thrilled to have Bishop Swanson embrace this new communication vehicle when it was suggested to him."

Swanson said his schedule doesn't allow him to file commentary and respond to postings as often as he'd like. But he finds blogging is an effective means of reaching clergy and laypeople alike. Very often, he receives postings from non-Methodists.

"This gives me a chance to get a feel of the temperature of an issue in my Episcopal area," he said. "I think I was open to (blogging) because I was new here, and I didn't have to follow a set pattern. "One of the most exciting moments was when I got my first response."

Swanson is not the only Methodist bishop reaching hearts and minds in the blogosphere others complete weekly or monthly epistles, Hankins said. "(Swanson) has picked up his blogging a little bit after I let him know the Kansas West bishop blogs on a regular basis," she said. She started to chuckle.

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